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## REVIEW

**Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution*. London: Verso, 2021. Pp. 256. ISBN: 9781839761393 (hardback).**

The debate about how to interpret Foucault's writings on neoliberalism has been going on for a while now: where some see in *The Birth of Biopolitics* a devastating critique of neoliberal reason, others see a laudatory exposition. Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora's recent book *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution*<sup>1</sup> is the newest contribution to this dispute. In it, the two authors rearticulate in book-length the position they have previously defended in several articles and book chapters: that Foucault was enticed by neoliberal thought and that his reading of Gary Becker and others significantly affected the intellectual trajectory of his later years.<sup>2</sup>

While this book adds very little that is new to the already-extensive debate about the correct understanding of Foucault's neoliberalism lectures, its appearance is nevertheless justified because it promises to go beyond narrow, scholarly spats about the proper interpretation of the French philosopher's writings. Aiming to deliver '[p]art intellectual history, part critical theory',<sup>3</sup> Dean and Zamora want to explore, through Foucault, how 'certain currents on the left ... came to appreciate the opportunities' of anti-collectivist elements of neoliberalism. They provide a genealogy of a certain Foucauldian 'thought style' characterised by a marriage of progressivism and individualism in order to reveal the shortcomings of Foucauldian thought for contemporary Left politics. While the arguments about what Foucault *really* thought of neoliberalism are central to the book – and many will no doubt find fault with its interpretation of Foucault in this regard – I set the somewhat tired exegetical debates aside for the purposes of this review. Instead, I focus on the book's, in my opinion, more interesting project of analysing the broader relations between neoliberalism, Foucauldian thought and Left politics. Despite being a well-written and in many places highly interesting and worthwhile book, it ultimately falls short of a compelling analysis in this regard.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in French in 2019, the English version is a substantially revised edition with two completely new chapters.

<sup>2</sup> E.g.: Daniel Zamora, "Foucault's Responsibility," *Jacobin* (Dec 15, 2014), and contributions to Daniel Zamora and Michael Behrent (eds.), *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Quote from the inside of the dust cover of the hardback edition.

First of all, readers who expect *The Last Man Takes LSD* to be about Foucault's experience of doing drugs in California will be disappointed: the LSD episode serves merely as a catchy frame story to introduce the analysis of Foucault's relationship with neoliberalism. Hyperbolic statements about how his LSD experience changed the entire trajectory of Foucault's thought have been made before and debunked,<sup>4</sup> but Dean and Zamora judiciously avoid making too strong claims here – the introduction makes it clear that the authors are using the LSD story metonymically to stand in for a whole host of 'limit experiences', including BDSM, visits to Zen monasteries, and the Iranian revolution. But while these personal 'experiments' do play a role in the authors' account of Foucault's thought, it is the 'surprising encounter with a new and increasingly influential form of political thought, neoliberalism, that [is] decisive' (p. 11) – and this is the book's focus.

Chapter 1, then, introduces this 'encounter' in the shape of Foucault's *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures and places both Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism and its reception in France and abroad in its historical context. Dean and Zamora persuasively argue that much of the work employing Foucauldian notions of governmentality has ignored the historical context in which he developed them. Chapter 2, 'Searching for a Left Governmentality', elaborates on this theme by further analysing the political context of Foucault's reception of neoliberalism. This was a context, of course, where elements of the French (and global) Left turned increasingly against traditional state-, class-, and party-centred politics following disillusionment both with the development of Soviet communism and the growing institutionalisation and ideological rigidity of domestic communist parties. The way this context is presented, however, leaves something to be desired. No real attempt is made to understand the New Left's critique of the 'Old' Left and its statist politics – were they really just duped by neoliberals or is it possible that a compelling critique of the capitalist welfare state was simply co-opted by neoliberal-leaning politicians? Dean and Zamora also conflate opposition to welfare state capitalism with opposition to Marxism – thus completely ignoring the fact that Marxist thinkers have long criticised capitalist welfare programmes as 'an anesthetic, distracting the oppressed from the true causes of their problems'.<sup>5</sup> While there is no doubt an interesting confluence between these two trends on the Left (arguably exemplified in Foucault), they cannot simply be equated with one another – analysis of such complexities is sorely missing from *The Last Man Takes LSD*.

If the beginning of the book stresses a certain discontinuity in Foucault's thought brought about by his encounter with neoliberalism, the two chapters that follow instead stress continuities between the French philosopher's earlier and later works. These are the most compelling and interesting chapters of the book, making the argument that Foucault's late writings on neoliberalism and the self, as well as his questionable take on the Iranian revolution, 'are consistent with his more general habits of thought, not only in the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Simeon Wade's book on the LSD episode and Kurt Borg's review of it. Simeon Wade, *Foucault in California: A True Story – Wherein the Great French Philosopher Drops Acid in the Valley of Death* (2019); Kurt Borg, "Foucault on Drugs: The Personal, the Ethical and the Political in *Foucault in California*," *Foucault Studies* 28 (2020), 142-164.

<sup>5</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005/1968), 152.

late 1970s but also throughout his career' (p. 124). Dean and Zamora show how we can trace the writings on the ethics of self with their focus on invention over interpretation back to Foucault's early writings on textual interpretation and his critique of the sovereignty of the author (chapter 3), and how his interpretation of the Iranian revolution as an 'ordeal' or '*épreuve*' can be connected to his earlier work on technologies of truth (chapter 4). These chapters reveal the resonances between Foucault's earlier and later work in a way that dispels the exaggerated idea of a sudden break (let alone one brought about by taking drugs in California) but without imposing artificial unity on his thought either. These chapters, while at times less directly critical of Foucault, form a crucial part of the book's argument: if one is convinced that there are some problematically individualist currents in Foucault's late work, then these cannot simply be dismissed as a fluke; we must, rather, look at the French philosopher's entire oeuvre and ask 'what parts of it might still illuminate the dilemmas of our time, our present and our struggles, and what parts of it can now join the dusty shelves' (p. 232).

Chapters 5 and 6 take up this question more explicitly and argue, by and large, for the 'dusty shelves' option. The fifth chapter, 'The Revolution Beheaded', returns to Foucault's *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures. In many ways, it constitutes the backbone of the book's argument, setting out Dean and Zamora's controversial interpretation of Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism. The argument – that Foucault saw in neoliberal thought a mode of governing compatible with a large degree of freedom to 'invent' oneself – will not be new to those familiar with the debates on Foucault and neoliberalism. The chapter adds nothing substantially new to this dispute, and it will be convincing to those who already agree with Dean and Zamora's position and unconvincing to those who do not. Chapter 6 picks up on another well-known debate, namely that on Foucault's normativity. Here, the authors refreshingly deflect the technical debates, inspired by Habermas' critique, of whether or not Foucault's framework can account for its own normative force and show instead that Foucault, throughout his life, clearly *did* take coherent, normative stances. Against the overly restrictive interpretation of normativity found both in critiques and defences of the French philosopher, Dean and Zamora argue that his is an 'exemplary normativity' (p. 173). The point of the chapter is, in part, to show that Foucauldian analysis cannot be seen as ideologically neutral, and this point is made most forcefully in the section about his lack of attention to inequality – be it the economic inequalities between classes or even the power inequalities inherent in personal and sexual relations (arguably the most compelling critique of Foucault presented in the book).

Throughout, however, the real source of the resonances between Foucault's normative stance and neoliberal thought remains unexplored. Dean and Zamora are well aware that Foucault was not a 'card-carrying' neoliberal (p. 189), but they claim that his 'encounter [with neoliberalism] was the crucible for a certain "thought style" which, while not self-consciously neoliberal, imagined itself as progressive and practical, on the one hand, while absolutely rejecting older socialist and social democratic approaches on the other' (p. 195). This implies a simplistic and unidirectional transfer of ideas from neoliberals like Gary Becker to Foucault and then to wider discourses within left politics and the

humanities.<sup>6</sup> Surely, the story is more complex than that. Dean and Zamora could have found inspiration, for example, in Nancy Fraser's much more nuanced account of how the once-emancipatory feminist critique of welfare state capitalism became co-opted by neoliberal politics, thereby entering into a 'dangerous liaison'.<sup>7</sup> *The Last Man Takes LSD* never puts Foucault into conversation with feminist, or indeed Marxist, critiques of the welfare state and ends up painting a nostalgic and rosy picture of post-war state-managed capitalism. It is paradoxical for a book that wants to interrogate the value of Foucauldian thought for leftist politics and, moreover, rightly insists on a historically contextualised approach that it never seeks to understand what motivated large sections of the left to resist state-managed capitalism.

The lack of analysis of the paradoxical confluence between left and right criticism of welfare capitalism continues in the final chapter, which moves on from Foucault's writings to give an account of neoliberalism. The chapter paints a straightforward picture of the rise and dangers of neoliberal politics – which, ironically for a book lamenting Foucault's enduring influence, reads like a mixture of the opposition to identity politics found in Foucauldians like Wendy Brown with the critique of neoliberal government offered by Foucauldians like Nikolas Rose. Dean and Zamora point to the similarities between Foucault's 'experimental' politics geared towards the liberation of subjectivity and neoliberalism's embrace of risk and the development of enterprising subjects – but they never convincingly explain these. If the authors had paid more attention to the motivations behind the left critiques of the welfare state, of which Foucault's was one, they also would have been better placed to explain how neoliberalism became so successful precisely by tapping into and appropriating the dissatisfaction with post-war capitalism (compare Boltanski and Chiapello's account of how the 'new spirit of capitalism' was shaped by incorporating 'creative' critiques of state-managed capitalism).<sup>8</sup> Such an approach would be able to account *both* for why Foucault's centring of the self in politics was compelling in its context *and* why it might be limiting in the current political environment. Unfortunately, then, Dean and Zamora never truly deliver on the promise to interrogate the relation between Foucault and neoliberal thought and its relevance for 'the dilemmas of our time, our present and our struggles'. Nevertheless, readers – even those who disagree with the book's fundamental theses – will find some compelling analyses in it and perhaps even inspiration to undertake a fuller study of the 'fortunes of Foucauldianism' (to riff off Nancy Fraser's 'fortunes of feminism').

## References

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<sup>6</sup> Compare also: '[Foucault's] complete redefinition of politics in terms of subjectivity must [...] be seen as a *starting point* for the production of a neoliberal left' (169, my emphasis).

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (2020), 219.

<sup>8</sup> Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2018/1999).

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